**The People Rebel**

On February 1, 1960 four young men who were students at NC A&T College sat down for lunch at Woolworth’s in Greensboro, NC. That would seem to be an ordinary event and it would be in 2022 but in 1960 it was remarkable because the young men were African Americans and Woolworth’s, like many businesses, had a policy of only serving whites. They were refused service and they refused to leave. Police were summoned but they could do nothing since the protest was peaceful. Within a week, 300 students joined the protest paralyzing the lunch counter and the movement spread to other towns. By the summer of that year, Woolworths and most other businesses became integrated because those 4 young men had the courage of their convictions. Margaret Mead wrote “Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world; indeed, it’s the only thing that ever has.” In our study of Numbers chapter 14, we see a small group of people having a negative influence on the entire population of the Israelites.

The chapter begins with the people reacting to the report from the men sent to scout Canaan. Because they described a land fraught with danger, the people the people reacted with fear. They wanted to go back to Egypt and desired a new leader to guide them back to their former lives of slavery. They were so afraid of battles with the occupants of Canaan they preferred death in the desert. Caleb and Joshua implored them to go into Canaan as God commanded. The people ignored their pleas and even talked of stoning them. God then appeared at the Tent of Meeting and told Moses that he would strike the people with a plague and build a new nation through Moses. God’s reaction to the rebellion of the people and Moses’ response were almost identical to their exchange after the incident with the golden calf described in Ex. 32:9-14. Moses appealed to God on behalf of the people invoking the prospect of the nations in the area mocking God for not delivering the Israelites into Canaan as He had vowed. Moses quoted God’s very words regarding His compassion, grace and forgiveness (see Ex. 34:6-7). Just as before, God relented at the request of Moses but He vowed that none of the men who had witnessed His miracles in the desert would survive to enter Canaan. God said that they had disobeyed and tested Him 10 times. The notes in my NIV Bible refer to the 10 times to which God referred, their sins ranging from complaints about food and water to idolatry. God repeated his judgment, being more specific that the only men above the age of 19 who would enter Canaan would be Caleb and Joshua. He would punish them for 40 years, 1 year for each of the 40 days they had explored the land. Ironically, their wish to die in the desert rather than at the tip of a sword was granted (see verses 2-3). God passed immediate judgment on the 10 men who had brought back the poor report by striking them down with a plague.

In a response that was too little and too late, the people expressed remorse over their sin and announced that they would go up to the land that God had promised. Moses warned them not to go because God would not be with them. The NIV states that in their presumption, they went up. They presumed that because God had been with them before, that He would go with them and defeat the inhabitants of the land. Even though the ark remained in the camp, they went into battle and were defeated, driven all the way back to Hormah.

The bad report issued by 10 men sealed the fate of 600,000 men and presumably their wives as well. The children they feared would be taken as plunder (v. 3) survived to receive their inheritance. James compared the tongue to a small spark that sets a great forest ablaze (3:5-6). The speech of those 10 men had great consequences. In Steve’s message on Sunday, he noted that the disciples were named by twos symbolic of how they would be sent out by twos. Having someone with you in a trial can bolster your courage. Just as those 4 young men in Greensboro buttressed one another, Joshua and Caleb each found strength in the other man and the bond formed between them would last. Unfortunately group think can be a negative influence as well as illustrated by the 10 men who opposed God. What would you do in a group that you would not do alone for good or ill? Peer pressure can be a powerful force. A small group of determined men can indeed change the world. After the death and resurrection of Jesus 2000 years ago, the eleven surviving disciples formed the core of the church that exists today.